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Abstract A two-pronged approach to studying the scriptures emphasizes language as well as doctrine. Some typical syntactic structures that appear in 19th-century Book of Mormon English include word-order variation, interruption, parenthesis, ellipsis, fragment, conjunctions, and parallel structure.



WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Cynthia L. Hallen

The Language of the Scriptures

The late President Marion G. Romney, while serving as second counselor in the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, gave wise counsel about the way we study the gospel. He recommended a two-dimensional approach that emphasizes language as well as doctrine:

You ought to read the gospel; you ought to read the Book of Mormon . . . ; and you ought to read all the scriptures with the idea of finding out what's in them and what the meaning is and not to prove some idea of your own. Just read them and plead with the Lord to let you understand what he had in mind when he wrote them. . . . Become acquainted with the language of the scriptures and the teachings of the scriptures.¹

One way to become acquainted with the language of the scriptures is to learn the names of various sentence structures, grammatical features, and rhetorical figures that commonly occur in Joseph Smith's English translation of the ancient American prophetic records abridged in the Book of Mormon.

Here are a few examples of typical syntactic structures that appear in 19th-century Book of Mormon English. Such structural figures are part of a long tradition of poetic and literary expression in scriptural texts from around the world:

1. Word-order variation (anastrophe and hyperbaton)
2. Interruption (anacoluthia)
3. Parenthesis
4. Ellipsis
5. Fragment (aposiopesis)
6. Conjunctions (polysyndeton and asyndeton)
7. Parallel structure (parison)

The technical terms for word-order variations are *anastrophe* and *hyperbaton*. *Anastrophe* is a general type of inversion for the sake of meter or style rather than emphasis. The words “blessed are ye” are a customary inversion, or *anastrophe*, of the clause “ye are blessed”:

Therefore **blessed are ye** if ye shall keep my commandments, which the Father hath commanded me that I should give unto you.
(3 Nephi 18:14)

The standard word order for clauses in contemporary English is subject-verb-object/complement (SVO/C). The inversion of that pattern, the object/complement-verb-subject (O/CVS) *anastrophe*, is found throughout the scriptures and in many classical literary texts. Other examples from the Book of Mormon include “a written word sent he” in Mosiah 29:4 and “this they have done” in Alma 60:9.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), *hyperbaton* is a “figure of speech in which the customary or logical order of words or phrases is inverted, esp. for the sake of emphasis.”² *Hyperbaton* is a more marked kind of inversion that may feature a more complex variation of word order, one that may call more attention to itself by emphasizing constituents that we would otherwise overlook, as in 3 Nephi 25:2: “[U]nto you that fear my name, shall the Son of Righteousness arise with healing in his wings” (see also Malachi 4:2). In standard English word order, we would say, “The Son of Righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings unto you that fear my name.”

Readers of the Book of Mormon may sometimes be surprised or even confused by verses that begin with one idea but then are interrupted by another idea. The technical term for this figure is *anacoluthia*,

defined in the *OED* as the “passing from one construction to another before the former is completed.” An example of such an interruption, or *anacoluthia*, is found at the end of the following verse:

I, Zeniff, having been taught in all the language of the Nephites, and having had a knowledge of the land of Nephi, or of the land of our fathers’ first inheritance, and having been sent as a spy among the Lamanites that I might spy out their forces, that our army might come upon them and destroy them—but when I saw that which was good among them I was desirous that they should not be destroyed. (Mosiah 9:1)

Other examples of *anacoluthia* are found in 2 Nephi 25:20, Alma 22:18, Mormon 6:11, and 3 Nephi 28:36–37.

The technical term *parenthesis* refers to a syntactic structure in which one phrase or clause appears in the middle of another, often as an interrupting idea. The *OED* defines parenthesis as an “explanatory or qualifying word, clause, or sentence inserted into a passage with which it has not necessarily any grammatical connexion.” Such constructions may or may not be marked by commas, dashes, or parentheses. Here is a good example of structural parenthesis, marked with dashes:

And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil—for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—and these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil. (Alma 40:13)

Other instances of parenthesis include Mosiah 8:1 and Alma 30:1–2. In the Book of Mormon, sometimes *anacoluthia* and complex parentheses are hard to distinguish from each other.

In an *ellipsis*, the author intentionally omits part of a construction. The *OED* defines ellipsis as “omission of one or more words in a sentence, which would be needed to complete the grammatical construction or fully to express the sense.” In 3 Nephi

27:33, the Lord says, “Wide is the gate, and broad the way which leads to death.” The verb *is* does not appear again in the second clause between *broad* and *the way* because the copula meaning and parallel structure do not necessitate repeating the verb. In an ellipsis, authors make an expression more concise by leaving out words that readers can fill in mentally for themselves. Alma 44:21 is a good example:

Now the number of their dead was not numbered because of the greatness of the number; yea, the number of their dead was exceedingly great, both on the Nephites and on the Lamanites.

We expect the text to read “both on *the side of* the Nephites and on *the side of* the Lamanites,” but the words “the side of” are understood from the context.

In standard academic written English today, editors may mark sentence fragments, or incomplete sentences, as a problem in an author’s text. However, in less formal writing, many published authors deliberately—and skillfully—employ fragments in the flow of their discourse. The technical term for such fragments is *aposiopesis*, which the *OED* defines as a “rhetorical artifice, in which the speaker comes to a sudden halt, as if unable or unwilling to proceed.” In 2 Nephi 2:10, we see an example of *aposiopesis*:

Wherefore, the ends of the law which the Holy One hath given, unto the inflicting of the punishment which is affixed, which punishment that is affixed is in opposition to that of the happiness which is affixed, to answer the ends of the atonement—

Although the expression is punctuated as a sentence with a capital letter at the beginning, the idea does not have an independent (main) clause, and it ends abruptly with a dash. The author moves to a new idea in the next verse: “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (v. 11). With *anacoluthia*, the author begins with one structure and finishes with another, whereas with *aposiopesis*, the author begins an idea and never finishes it at all. Other examples of *aposiopesis* in the Book of Mormon include Jacob 4:1, Mosiah 13:28, and Alma 52:15.

In contemporary written English, we usually separate items in a series with commas and then

use a conjunction before the last item, as in “faith, hope, **and** charity.” In scriptural texts, authors used two rhetorical variations of structure for items in a series: *polysyndeton* and *asyndeton*. Polysyndeton is the use of multiple conjunctions, placed between every item in a series. We see this in 2 Nephi 9:28: “O the vainness, **and** the frailties, **and** the foolishness of men!” Asyndeton is the lack of any conjunctions between the items of a series. A famous example is the Isaiah passage quoted in 2 Nephi 19:6: “and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” Contemporary readers expect an *and* before “The Prince of Peace,” but an author can accelerate the rhythm and impact of the expression by leaving the conjunction out. Other examples appear in 3 Nephi 18:3, 4 Nephi 1:16, and Mosiah 3:19.

What we call parallel syntactic structure, or parallelism, is called *parison* in some rhetorical taxonomies. Authors of scriptural and poetic texts use parison as a matrix for repetition and variation of sounds, senses, and structures in memorable and meaningful patterns. Here is a good example of four

parallel phrases, or parisonic structure, connected by polysyndeton conjunctions in one verse of scripture:

Behold, it is expedient that much should be done among this people, because of **the hardness of their hearts, and the deafness of their ears, and the blindness of their minds, and the stiffness of their necks.** (Jarom 1:3)

Parison can occur at every level of language: word, phrase, clause, sentence, and even paragraph. Another example is found in 2 Nephi 14:2.

Unfamiliar constructions can act as stumbling blocks for some readers of the Book of Mormon, so learning the language of the scriptures can improve reading comprehension. Some people may find these rhetorical figures to be rather dry details, but readers can benefit from identifying and naming the features of language that constitute a scriptural text. Other readers may simply enjoy exploring the texture of the text, like admiring the patterns and threads of a master weaver. You are welcome to send comments or questions to Cynthia_Hallen@byu.edu. 

Zedekiah” spoken of in 1 Nephi 1:4 does not refer to 21-year-old Zedekiah’s installation by Nebuchadnezzar, but to the year 609 BC, theorizing that following the death of Zedekiah’s father, Josiah (see 2 Kings 23:29–30), and the Egyptian removal of Zedekiah’s older full brother Jehoahaz from the throne (see 2 Kings 23:30–34), the young 8-year-old Zedekiah was recognized by Judah as legitimate heir to the throne, even though the Egyptians installed his older half brother Jehoiakim (see 2 Kings 23:34). This solution further theorizes that the exilic or postexilic composer of the last segment of 2 Kings (comprising 2 Kings 23:26–25:30) was unaware of the situation with young Zedekiah and reported only the tenure of the Egyptian vassal Jehoiakim, first mentioning Zedekiah at his installment by the Babylonians at age 21. However, it would have been the young 8-year-old Zedekiah in a 609 BC context of whom Nephi was speaking in 1 Nephi 1:4, with Lehi prophesying some three years in the context of 1 Nephi 1 before leaving Jerusalem in 605 BC.

25. John L. Sorenson, “The Mulekites,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 8.

26. Sorenson, “Mulekites,” 8.

27. One interpretation of Lachish Letter III is that the commander of Judah’s army went to Egypt during this window of opportunity. See John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 330.

28. Sorenson, “Mulekites,” 9.

29. See Sorenson, “Mulekites,” 9.

30. Although the northern Sinai trail to Egypt was a desert, the Bible does not generally refer to the relatively short trip from Judah to Egypt along that route as a “wilderness” event. Since Omni 16 uses the term *journeyed*, a longer and more arduous desert trek could be indicated, and North Africa would represent a wilderness journey as difficult and long for Mulek’s party as Arabia had been for Lehi’s party. Sorenson suggests Carthage (in modern Tunisia) as a possible port of embarkation for America (see “Mulekites,” 9). But perhaps the journey in the wilderness went all the way across the continent, past the Atlas Mountains. The further west Mulek’s party traveled across North Africa, the shorter the sea voyage would

have been, so that a port west of the Straits of Gibraltar, on the coast of modern Morocco, would have spared Mulek’s party a complicated sail across the Mediterranean.

31. A theophoric element means a word particle that utilizes all or part of a divine name. The theophoric element *-yahu* is an adumbrated form of the full divine name *Yahuweh* (יהוה), which is rendered in King James English as Jehovah.
32. For example, *Ge’alyahu ben hamelek*, who seems to have owned at least two different seals (*Corpus* nos. 412 and 413), and *Neriyahu ben hamelek*, who seems to have owned at least three (*Corpus* nos. 17, 18, and 415). See Avigad and Sass, *Corpus*, 55–56, 174–75, and endnote 14 above.

A Test of Faith: The Book of Mormon in the Missouri Conflict
Clark V. Johnson

1. Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 62–88.
2. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 1:390–91; also cited in Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 68.
3. Consult the account of John P. Greene in Clark V. Johnson, ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992), 22.
4. The affidavits used in this paper describe the settlement and persecution of the Mormons in western Missouri from 1831 through 1839. These 773 documents were written and sworn before county officers in ten counties in Illinois and two in the Iowa territory between 1839 and 1845. The documents used in this paper are sometimes referred to as “affidavits” or “petitions.” When Joseph Smith presented them to the United States Congress in 1839–40, he referred to them as “claims.”
5. The known petitions are in the Family and Church History Department Archives in Salt Lake City and in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. All quotations in this study are exactly the same as the original

petitions, including the punctuation and spelling.

6. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 685–86.
7. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 423.
8. In addition to the personal abuse that Truman Brace suffered, the mobbers took from him two horses, one steer, a sheep, two guns, four pistols, and household furniture, and they destroyed his crops and garden (Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 45).
9. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 144–45.
10. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 431–32. By Cole’s account, he and his family lost 40 acres of land as a result of persecution.
11. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 652–54.
12. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 22.
13. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 652–53.
14. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 22.

[What’s in a Word?]

The Language of the Scriptures
Cynthia L. Hallen

1. Marion G. Romney, address given at Seminary and Institute of Religion Coordinators’ Convention, 3 April 1973, quoted in *Book of Mormon (Religion 121–122) Student Manual*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 437–38.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Cambridge: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

[New Light]

The Book of Mormon as a Written (Literary) Artifact
Grant Hardy

1. Both the original and the printer’s manuscripts have verse 16 placed exactly where it has always been in all printed editions of the Book of Mormon; there is no indication of an error in the dictation or the transcription. For more information on the transmission of text of the Book of Mormon, see George A. Horton Jr., “Book of Mormon Transmission from Translator to Printed Text,” in Paul R. Cheesman, ed., *The Keystone Scripture* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 237–55; and M. Gerald Bradford and

Alison V. P. Coutts, eds., *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

2. For more details about the discipline of textual criticism, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992); or L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).
3. Daniel Ludlow has suggested that the strange reading in Alma 24:19—“they buried their weapons of peace, or they buried the weapons of war, for peace”—might be the result of an engraving error that could not be erased but was nevertheless immediately corrected. Other possible examples he points to include Mosiah 7:8, Alma 50:32, Helaman 3:33, and 3 Nephi 16:4. See Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 210. Another instance may occur in Alma 13:16, the subject of this essay, when the writer decides midsentence that the manner of priesthood ordinations is not just a type or symbol of God’s order; it is actually the order of God itself.
4. See Robert J. Matthews, “The New Publications of the Standard Works—1979, 1981,” *BYU Studies* 22/4 (Fall 1982): 387–424.
5. By chapter, the references are as follows: *New Revised Standard*—Exodus 18, 22; Judges 20; Ezekiel 21, 22; Zechariah 5; John 8; Romans 16; 1 Corinthians 14; *Revised English Bible*—1 Samuel 9; 2 Samuel 14; Judges 20; Job 3, 14, 20, 24, 29, 31 (twice), 33, 34, 35, 37; Ecclesiastes 2; Isaiah 10, 38, 40; John 8; Romans 16.